

# Dizziness and Balance

Your brain maintains balance by using information from your eyes, the inner ear (vestibular system), and the sensory systems of the body (such as the skin, muscles, and joints). Problems with any one of these three systems can result in vertigo, dizziness, and/or unsteadiness. Dizziness is a common reason adults seek medical attention.

## What are vertigo, dizziness, and unsteadiness?

*Vertigo* is the feeling of self-motion or spinning when you are not moving. Vertigo is often considered a different symptom than dizziness. *Dizziness* is nonspecific and can refer to a range of symptoms, such as lightheadedness or vertigo. Both vertigo and dizziness can happen all of a sudden or be triggered by position change, head movement, certain visual environments, or sounds, among other things. In addition, both vertigo and dizziness can affect your ability to stay in an upright position. In many cases, *unsteadiness*—the feeling of being unstable while seated, standing, or walking—can occur and may result in increased risk of falling.

Other symptoms that may be present with vertigo, dizziness, and unsteadiness include nausea, vomiting, faintness, changes in hearing, pressure or fullness in the ear[s], increased tinnitus (ringing in the ear[s]), fear, and anxiety.

## What causes vertigo, dizziness, or unsteadiness?

Some causes of vertigo, dizziness, and unsteadiness include the following:

- acoustic neuroma or vestibular schwannoma (tumors that affect the nerve leading to the ear)
- [benign paroxysmal positional vertigo \(BPPV\)](#) [PDF] (BPPV is caused by tiny crystals in the ear coming loose. Calcium crystals are found within the

inner ear and help people sense gravity.)

- blood pressure changes
- cardiovascular problems
- fistula (hole) in the inner ear such as superior canal dehiscence syndrome
- head injury
- infections, including [ear infections](#) [PDF]
- Ménière's disease
- migraine
- multiple medicines or drugs that can increase your risk of falling
- multiple sclerosis
- [ototoxic medications](#) [PDF] (medicines that are poisonous to the ear or balance system)
- visual disorders

## When should I seek medical care?

Vertigo, dizziness, and unsteadiness can occur with other serious illness. Therefore, if you have any of the following symptoms, be sure to seek emergency medical care:

- chest pain
- falling or problems walking
- fever that is high
- head trauma or injury
- hearing loss that is sudden
- leg and/or arm weakness
- numbness or tingling
- neck stiffness that is severe
- speech that is slurred
- vision that is blurry

It is important to see your physician to determine why you may have these symptoms. In some cases, symptoms can be treated medically, surgically, or with vestibular rehabilitation. Based on your symptoms, your physician may refer you for *balance testing* by an audiologist. The purpose of balance testing is to evaluate your eyes, your inner ears (vestibular system), and the sensory systems of your body (such as the skin, muscles, and joints)

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to determine the cause of your symptoms. Because hearing loss can accompany a balance disorder, a hearing test is often included. Some balance tests can be done in your physician's office. Other balance tests require specialized equipment located in the audiology office or clinic.

## Balance (or Vestibular) Rehabilitation

Your audiologic (hearing), balance, and medical diagnostic tests help indicate whether vestibular (balance) rehabilitation could help you. *Vestibular rehabilitation* is an individualized balance-retraining exercise program. The goal of vestibular rehabilitation is to decrease dizziness, improve balance, improve functional activities, and improve quality of life. Many audiologists provide some vestibular rehabilitation. However, other clinicians, such as physical therapists and occupational therapists, are specifically trained to provide more extensive rehabilitation as well as fall-risk prevention.

## When should I see an audiologist?

*Audiologists* perform tests to gather information about your hearing and balance function. Test results help determine the possible cause(s) of your symptoms. Medical findings and test results will provide diagnostic information on how to treat your vertigo, dizziness, and unsteadiness. Audiologists can give you information to help you learn what is causing your symptoms. Knowing what is happening is often a great relief that eases the uncertainty of the condition.

Notes:

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Content contributed by ASHA member Kristen Janky, AuD, PhD, CCC-A.

For more information and to view the entire Audiology Information Series library, visit [www.asha.org/aud/pei/](http://www.asha.org/aud/pei/).

For more information about balance problems, preventing falls, hearing loss, hearing aids, or referral to an ASHA-certified audiologist, contact:



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